## The Philosophical Side of Genealogy

This article examines why genealogy is important. It discusses what motivates people to spend considerable amounts time researching family trees to discover their roots. The first part of the article discusses the many practical reasons why people get involved with genealogy. Often, these practical aspects satisfy basic human curiosity. The second part of the article focuses on the philosophical aspects of human curiosity and how it motivates people to research their family tree.

Knowledge of the specific factors that motivate genealogists in their research can be a source of inspiration and support when you hit the inevitable roadblocks and brick walls in your own personal genealogy research. As well, knowledge of what motivates the genealogy community is helpful in understanding the future direction of ancestral research.

**The Practical Side of Genealogy**

Below are some of the main practical reasons why people take up genealogy:

* **Validate Family Stories** – To determine if family stories about their ancestors are true.
* **Famous People** – To find out if they are related to someone famous.
* **Historical Event** – To gain a better understanding of an ancestor’s involvement in a famous historical event.
* **Trace Medical Conditions** –To assess the risk of getting certain medical conditions that run in families.
* **Trace a Family Inheritance** –To determine genealogical proof of a family connection for potential heirs.
* **Find Birth Parents** – To determine the birth parents of an adopted child. Alternatively, to find children given up for adoption.
* **Proof of Paternity** – To determine the biological father of a child.
* **Religious Tenet** –To satisfy the tenets of the religion. The most notable example is the Mormon Church (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints).
* **Community History** – To document a community history by understanding the families that founded and influenced the community.
* **Historic Studies** – To provide insight into history through the scholarly study of a famous family, such as a royal family.
* **Heritage Societies** –To provide proof of lineage to quality for a heritage society.
* **Preserving Family Traditions** – To preserve knowledge of ancestors who contributed to family traditions, such as a family recipe book.
* **Preserve Family Culture** – To allow families that have migrated to another country the opportunity to preserve some of the culture of their old country.
* **Reconnect with Family** – To find and reconnect with living relatives.

And, finally:

* **Family Legacy** – To fulfill a desire to pass on a legacy to future generations.

**The Philosophical Side of Genealogy**

At its root, genealogy satisfies basic human curiosity. These needs can be summed up in three fundamental questions:

• **The Past** – Where do I come from?  
• **The Present** – Why am I here?  
• **The Future** – What is going to happen to me?

Interestingly enough, the three fundamental questions that underpin genealogy are also the three questions that form the basis of all the major religions of the world. People have a basic desire to know where they came from and how they got to where they are today. Thus, in some ways there is a philosophical connection between genealogy and religion.

Another philosophical approach can be defined by taking a family tree and flipping it on its head. In other words, invert the timeline of a family tree and look at it from the perspective of one of your ancestors. From the point of view of your ancestor, you would represent the future. Such a simple exercise produces a profound truth: you are the end product of many generations that came before you.

Chances are many of your ancestors had to overcome great personal hardship in their lives. The knowledge that your ancestors had great inner strength can be a powerful motivator for anyone trying to understand their place in the world. If it were not for them, you would not be here today reading these words.

### Final Thoughts

Genealogy helps satisfy a deep need to understand how we fit into the broader world around us. From this perspective, genealogy is more than just a collection of single family threads that go through time. Genealogy truly is a journey of many lifetimes woven together from the past, the present and (from our perspective) the future. Genealogy is a popular pastime and it is important because, ultimately, it lies at the heart of the human condition.

"Why Genealogy Is Important (page 2)." *GenealogyInTime Magazine*. Web. 29 Apr. 2011. <http://www.genealogyintime.com/GenealogyResources/Articles/why\_genealogy\_is\_important\_page2.html>.